

US policy and the Arab Spring

If Washington vetoes Palestinian state recognition in the Security Council it will irreparably harm its standing and interests in the Arab region, writes **Azmi Ashour***

When people in Arab and Islamic societies think of the US, two images pop to mind. The first is that of a superpower with an unmitigated pro-Israeli bias; the second is that of a symbol of Western civilisation and modern scientific and technological progress. The former sparks widespread anger and anti-US hatred; the latter inspires considerable respect for the US and the dream to visit it. This love-hate relationship with the US became more distinct following the onset of the Arab Spring. The popular uprisings that surprised Washington by overthrowing its staunchest allies in Tunisia and Egypt threw into relief the double standards in American foreign policy, as epitomised by the lip-service it paid to the need for democratisation while sustaining decades-long friendships with some of the longest-lived dictatorships in the Arab world. The question now is whether the Arab revolutions will have a concrete effect on US foreign policy towards the region, especially with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The US's pursuit of its interests in this region have been characterised by two main constants. One is its fanatical support for Israel, often to the detriment of Arab rights and interests, to which testify the 40 times that Washington availed itself of its right to veto of the Security Council, against any resolution censuring Israel for its abuse of Arab rights. The other is its alliances with despotic regimes in order to realise its economic interests, even if this actively worked against the democratisation and progress of the societies ruled by those regimes. Within this framework, both sides resorted to various stratagems, ruses and various forms of cat-and-mouse to pursue their interests (the US) or to wriggle out of US pressures and perpetuate their rule (the Arab regimes). After the events of 11 September, in particular, the terrorist bugbear was continuously conjured up and both sides became more addicted than ever to playing

assorted roles in the Arab- Israeli "peace process" game with no sincere desire for a real solution.

This is pretty much how the situation stood until the beginning of this year when, suddenly, a wave of popular revolutions swept the region, achieving what US military might failed to accomplish in Iraq and elsewhere. In the space of days, popular movements, through their own drive and initiative, overthrew two dictators who were long-term allies of the US, taking not only the US government but also all its political analysts completely by surprise. But if these people's movements have forced Washington to stop supporting dictatorial regimes in their countries and, simultaneously, to keep from meddling in their revolutions, will this somehow cause it to reflect seriously on its policy towards Israel? In other words, will it now begin to temper that Israel right-or-wrong attitude that has generated such frustration and anger against the US and that has fed the forces of Islamist extremism that have called for war on the US on the grounds of its complicity in Israeli crimes?

The true test of American policy on this matter in this season of the Arab Spring will be the stance it takes on the Palestinians' bid for UN recognition of its right to statehood. If Washington uses its veto once again in favour of Israel, which appears to be the most likely scenario, judging from the pressures it exerted on Mahmoud Abbas to keep him from bringing his plea for statehood to the Security Council and from its intensive international lobbying against a resolution, it will be telling us that it has failed to read the Arab revolutions correctly. One may even wonder whether it has been blinded by a resentment of these revolutions and a desire to turn the clock back in the region to the era of US-friendly dictatorships, for if the Arab revolutions told it anything it is that the very people who could summon the courage and will to free themselves from oppressive regimes at home will be no less determined in their fight to liberate occupied Arab territories. Any government that comes to power by popular will, as expressed through free and fair democratic elections, will not shirk acting in a manner that reflects its citizens' sympathy for the Palestinians and all other peoples under occupation. Washington should also bear in mind that Arab societies in this post-revolutionary period will respond to a US veto in ways that may prove as unpredictable as the Arab revolutions themselves.

What is certain is that a veto will only further inflame anti-US hatred. People will rightfully be asking themselves what the US is waiting for. The internal Palestinian situation may not be rosy, given factional tensions between Fatah and Hamas, but surely that is not sufficient grounds for indefinitely deferring recognition of a Palestinian state. Could it be that certain circles in Washington plan to bide their time until the Arab revolutions are reversed? What would make President Obama renege on the pledges he made in his address from Cairo University when he raised such high hopes and created such a positive impression in the Arab world? Does it all just boil down to domestic equations and US presidential election strategies, complicated by an intractable economic crisis? Even if it seems to make good campaign sense to cater to the mood of this segment of the US electorate or that on this issue, one would think that the US administration would be a little more farsighted.

The Arab Spring has brought American power and influence in this region to a crossroads. The success of the popular revolutions should galvanise Washington into rethinking the policies and behaviour that led to its quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq and to the perpetuation of its alliances with repressive regimes that exposed the hollowness of its claims to champion democracy. Surely, if it continues to cling to the traditional constants of its Middle East policy its prestige and influence in this region will only deteriorate further, especially given the emergence of regional powers, such as Turkey, which have responded to the new climate much more affirmatively and pragmatically than anything that has come out of Washington so far. As the Security Council vote on recognition of Palestinian statehood approaches, the US should take the opportunity to reconsider its determination to wield its veto power, thereby demonstrating that it has brought its reading of the peoples of this region up to date.

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